

Education for Liberal Democracy: Universalising a Western Construct?

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An influential view of liberalism and its view of education holds that it is a western construct unsuited to non-western societies. Bikhu Parekh's critique of liberal democracy is taken here as representative of that position. In challenging that view, this article shows through an analysis of recent policy that post-apartheid education in South Africa expresses a liberal view of education, just as the political order introduced in 1994 is a liberal one. If we adopt Parekh's principle that societies should be allowed to choose their own destinies, there are transcendental grounds for promoting liberalism and a liberal view of education outside of the liberal western democracies.

In recent decades globalisation in education has fostered policy borrowing between countries, an increasingly common curriculum and an international shift to competencies and outcomes. What about conceptions of education and its aims? While liberal views of education are influential if not dominant in many western countries, the opinion that liberalism and its conception of education is a western construct of limited relevance and appropriateness beyond western societies is widely held and influential. In its South African expression, this position is contemptuous of liberalism which it sees as irrelevant to the post-apartheid dispensation, to the point that there is little discussion of the issue at all. The new political order in South Africa is regarded as democratic, but it is not seen as an expression of liberal ideas. Nor is post-apartheid education associated in either policy discourse or popular debate with a liberal approach to education.

As political and educational ideologies tend to complement one another, settling the issue of the relevance and appropriateness of liberal education to non-western countries is part of the wider issue of the relationship between liberalism and social order outside the west. In taking issue with the view that liberalism is either irrelevant or inappropriate to non-western societies, I will argue that the new democratic order in South Africa and its education system presuppose some central distinguishing features of liberalism. In the near absence of explicit critical engagement with liberalism by its opponents, I will take the

argument forward by responding to Bikhu Parekh's significant recent critique of liberalism in his paper, 'The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy' (1993). While I will test his arguments against the South African example, I intend to pose implications which go beyond this particular case.

My discussion will proceed in four parts. In the first section of the paper I will discuss the conception of education in policy documents in South Africa since 1994, showing how they express a liberal view of education. This will be followed in the second section by a critical discussion of Parekh's challenge to the appropriateness of liberal democracy for non-western societies. Parekh makes two central claims in his critique of liberal democracy: that it is a western construct, and that as such it should not be regarded as universalisable. In responding to these claims, an account of Parekh's argument will be followed by a critical discussion which will question his account of liberalism, on which the veracity of his two central claims depends, as well as drawing attention to strong tendencies against universalism in current liberal theory. In the third section, post-apartheid South Africa will be described as a liberal democracy, disputing the claim that liberal democracy is a western construct which is by implication not suitable for application beyond western societies. This argument will address the second feature of Parekh's critique of liberal democracy by suggesting that universalisation of liberalism beyond western democracies is already under way. Furthermore, it is argued in the fourth section, if we adopt Parekh's principle that societies should be allowed to choose their own political destinies, there are transcendental grounds for promoting liberalism in those societies. In societies like South Africa, where liberalism has an influential political and educational presence, problems that face liberal polities and their education systems should be acknowledged and addressed.

EDUCATION AFTER APARTHEID

Policy documents on education in South Africa since the transition to democracy in 1994 reflect a conception of education which is liberal in its central features. *The White Paper on Education and Training* (Department of Education, 1995), the policy framework for post-apartheid education, expresses a liberal view of education, on two levels. First, the transformed education system which it envisages rests on a set of liberal principles. Education and training are to help build a nation that is free of all forms of discrimination (p.17). Equal educational rights are acknowledged as a component of equal citizenship (p.19). Various rights are recognised, including the right to basic education, to education in one's language of choice where this is 'reasonably practicable' (p.42), and the right of equal access to educational institutions. Freedom of belief, religion, expression and opinion in education are recognised. Liberty and equality are among the necessary conditions for pursuing and enjoying lifelong learning

(p.22). The White Paper also embraces the liberal principle of tolerance by stating that the realisation of the conditions for democracy 'requires the active encouragement of *mutual respect for our people's diverse religious, cultural and language traditions*, the right to enjoy and practice them in peace and without hindrance . . .' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original).

Second, reflecting its endorsement of these liberal principles, the White Paper emphasises, in describing the citizen who will live under the new Constitution, that:

The curriculum, teaching methods and textbooks at all levels and in all programmes of education and training, should encourage *independent and critical thought*, the capacity to question, enquire, reason, weigh evidence and form judgments, achieve understanding . . . (*ibid.*, emphasis in original)

This endorsement of independent and critical thought shares the emphasis of liberal education on the development of autonomy as its central aim and of critical thinking as a necessary feature of autonomy.

The South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996b) legislates on the organisation, governance and funding of schools in pursuit of the aims declared in the White Paper. Recognising the racial inequality and segregation on which the previous system was based, the Act sets out 'to redress injustices in educational provision' (p. 5), and to provide quality education for all, combatting all forms of discrimination and intolerance, protecting a diversity of cultures and languages and upholding the rights of pupils, parents and teachers. The Act prohibits public schools from discriminating in the admission of pupils (p.6), abolishes corporal punishment in schools (p.10), and provides for free and voluntary participation in religious services for pupils and members of staff (p.8).

The qualities of citizenship envisaged in the White Paper have been taken up in the development of a new curriculum for schools, known as Curriculum 2005 (Ministry of Education, 1997). One of the seven generic or cross-curricular outcomes of the new curriculum is the use of critical and creative thinking to identify and solve problems and to make decisions. One of the eight new learning areas which are to replace the traditional subjects in the General Education phase of Curriculum 2005 is the Human and Social Sciences (pp.49–85), whose aims include developing critical, responsible citizens for a democratic society with a diverse citizenry. These citizens will be able to investigate, reflect, use evidence appropriately, construct reasoned arguments, make sound judgements and take appropriate action. Both the Human and Social Sciences and the learning area called Life Orientation (pp.235–253) will develop an awareness of human rights, and Life Orientation includes among its assessment criteria the capacity to make choices and to take responsibility for them. These qualities are prerequisites for the autonomy associated with liberal education and citizenship in a liberal democracy.

BIKHU PAREKH'S CHALLENGE TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Parekh challenges what he sees as the widespread claim that, following the collapse of communism, western liberal democracy is so far the best form of government to have been devised and that its spread should be encouraged.

Liberal democracy, which is culturally particular to the west, is premised on liberalism, in which the individual is prior to society, both conceptually and ontologically. The 'atomic liberal individual' is abstracted from relations with others; liberal individualism lacks a sense of community, ignoring the communal context which the individual needs in order to flourish. According to Parekh, the main role of government for the liberal 'is to create and maintain a system of rights and to undertake activities required by this' (1993, p. 159). It is not the role of the government to pursue large-scale goals. Since citizens of a liberal society do not hold a common conception of the good life, the government has no source from which it can legitimately derive substantive goals that go beyond creating a framework within which citizens can pursue theirs.

Parekh focuses on two features of liberal democracy which he sees as limiting its democratic component. He attributes to liberal democracy, first, unease about the prospect of a universal franchise, based on mistrust of the masses. Second, liberals tend to favour representative government rather than representative democracy, the former leaving elected officials free once elected to act as they see fit, while the latter would be government by the people through their representatives.

Parekh argues against what he sees as an insistence on the universalisation of western liberalism in the form of liberal democracy. He distinguishes between liberal democracy, on the one hand, in which liberalism is the dominant concept, and democratic liberalism, in which democracy is dominant. How the concepts of democracy and liberalism are combined, he argues, should depend on the context of a particular polity. While conceding that liberal democracy gives moral depth to democracy through its strong emphasis on basic human rights, Parekh argues that we should not assume that all features associated with liberal democracy such as elections, multiple political parties and the separation of powers, should be applied in all societies. Societies should be free to choose appropriate forms of government. 'As long as their forms of government are acceptable to their people and meet the basic conditions of good government... [societies] must be at liberty to work out their political destiny themselves' (*ibid.*, p. 170).

Parekh's opposition to the universalisation of liberal democracy as inappropriate to non-western societies with different traditions and aspirations depends on his characterisation of liberalism. Although I will return later to Parekh's two central claims, I raise at this stage some critical comments about his account of liberalism and of the central features of liberal democracy.

First, Parekh attributes to liberalism a commitment by definition to individualism, to the notion that the atomic individual is conceptually

prior to society. But while this may historically be an attribute of some liberal theories, it is not a necessary feature of liberalism. This is borne out by the fact that some contemporary liberal theorists pay considerable attention to the social context in which the individual is located. The most striking example of this is the work of Joseph Raz, whose account of autonomy (1986) emphasises that personal well-being is only possible in a social or cultural context. Will Kymlicka (1989) defends liberalism against the charge that it is insensitive to the value and significance of community and culture. His defence of minority rights (1995) also emphasises that the lives of individuals are located in a shared social context and that there is a relationship between individual freedom and cultural membership.

Second and similarly, Parekh's claim that the liberal conception of the state necessarily assumes that its role is to protect the rights of individuals and not to pursue a particular conception of the good does not take current disputes within liberal theory into account. His claim is not true of Raz (1986), whose formulation of liberalism does permit governments to pursue conceptions of the good that will promote citizens' well-being. What is more, Raz does not endorse a rights-based conception of morality.

In claiming that 'By and large... liberal democracy has managed to retain the structural design it evolved in the latter half of the nineteenth-century and to keep the democratic impulse under check' (*ibid.*, p. 165), Parekh bases much of his account of liberalism on selected aspects of John Stuart Mill's conception of liberalism (see also Parekh, 1994). From this a further pair of claims is derived: that liberal democracy is uneasy about the universal franchise and that, relatedly, it favours representative government rather than either representative or participatory democracy. This may be true of some twentieth-century liberal thinkers as well as Mill, but it is not so of others, and it is not a necessary feature of liberal democracy, with its emphasis on the people exercising control over policies and on equal rights to participation (Beetham, 1993).

There is some doubt, then, as to the accuracy of Parekh's characterisation of liberalism as the theoretical underpinning of liberal democracy. It must also be pointed out that the opinion that liberal democracy ought to be universalised, while undoubtedly popular, cannot be assumed to be a feature of contemporary liberal theory. An explicit and important theme of John Rawls's political liberalism (1993) is that Rawls restricts himself to theorising about liberal values as latent in the political culture shared by citizens of western liberal democracy. Not only does Rawls not intend his theory of political liberalism to be applied outside of such a context; his political conception of justice is worked out for the basic structure of a political regime and is intended to accommodate various comprehensive doctrines in a reasonable pluralism. Nor does Rawls, the leading interpreter of liberal ideas in the late twentieth century, come close to suggesting that liberalism represents a final truth, or imply that all societies should conform to its valid ideas. His notion of the burdens

of judgement, the sources of reasonable disagreement between the holders of different comprehensive doctrines, precludes this.

Rawls's restriction of his liberal theory to western liberal democracies raises the issue of the prospects for liberalism outside of such societies, and takes us back to Parekh's argument against encouraging the transfer of liberal democratic ideas beyond western liberal democracies. A response to both Parekh and Rawls is posed by the example of South Africa's turn to liberal democracy and a liberal system of education since the end of apartheid.

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AFTER APARTHEID

Since the demise of apartheid, liberalism has continued to be widely derided, or at best ignored as irrelevant to South African affairs. The explanation for this lies partly in the circumstances of the struggle against the apartheid order, where liberals were unable to provide the strategies and mobilisation that were needed to overthrow apartheid and were regarded by some as its accomplices, as well as in the intellectual climate of the seventies and eighties, which was dominated by the revisionist critique of liberalism. Some of the characteristics attributed to liberalism by its critics were similar to those advanced by Parekh, and of debatable accuracy — centrally the interpretation of its emphasis on individual freedom as endorsing atomistic individualism.

But in the post-apartheid context the continuing dismissal of liberalism in South Africa is contradicted by the distinctly liberal features of the new political order reflected in the Constitution adopted in 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). The new Constitution confirms a vision of democracy that developed during the anti-apartheid struggle and which is shared with other liberal democracies. The Constitution breaks with the racial differentiation of the past, providing for a common citizenship with equal rights and responsibilities for all (section 3), breaking with the racially differentiated constitutions of the apartheid era. The rights of all citizens are enshrined in the Bill of Rights (sections 7–39) in which the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom are affirmed (section 7.(1)). An extensive range of rights is affirmed, including freedom and security of the person, privacy, freedom of religion, belief and opinion, expression, assembly, association, children's rights, and the right to basic education.

A distinguishing characteristic of the Constitution is its endorsement of principles central to the liberal tradition. While liberals themselves continue to contest this tradition, its characteristic features include first its concern with freedom — of participation, of the person and of speech, expression, conscience and opinion, the basic liberties endorsed by Rawls. Second, it is characterised by a commitment to equality — to the need to remove discrimination, extremes of wealth and poverty, and artificial hierarchies. The Constitution also reflects other features of liberal democracies like the separation of the powers of the executive, legislature and judiciary, and the rule of law. And it is the framework for

post-apartheid education policy, which is based on liberal principles of freedom, equality, tolerance, rights and autonomy.

Complex though the post-apartheid engagement with liberalism may be, we can see in this example a case of what Parekh calls a multi-communal polity working out its own political destiny by collectively choosing a constitution based on liberal principles. The transition to democracy achieved in 1994 was conducted through elections for a representative assembly, contested by multiple political parties, features of liberal democracy that Parekh appears to regard as not always appropriate to non-western polities, but which were crucial to ensuring the success of the transition. The Constitution provides for the establishment of a number of state institutions supporting constitutional democracy, including the Human Rights Commission, among whose functions is the promotion of a culture of human rights. The Bill of Rights affirms various rights which protect not only the basic human rights which Parekh favours, but also the 'bourgeois rights' which he associates with liberalism.

The adoption of such features of what Parekh regards as liberal democracy, in which liberalism predominates, should be interpreted in the context of a society attempting to overcome an oppressive and illiberal past. The apartheid regime was an illiberal one, both in its policies and in the opposition to liberalism explicitly expressed in apartheid ideology. But in relation to Parekh's argument there is more to post-apartheid liberalism than this. For the new liberalism in South Africa reflects a decision, whose full implications are yet to be debated, to transform the society in general — including traditions that are seen to be undemocratic. Although the Constitution protects the rights of citizens to enjoy their culture, the transition to democracy has been accompanied by a recognition that, as part of the process of transformation, some cultural practices will have to change, as demanded in the African National Congress (ANC) Women's League's declaration that 'customary laws and the institution of traditional leaders are oppressive to women' (*The Star*, 1996, p.5) and that they negate the rights of women.

It must be acknowledged that while the new Constitution reflects a commitment to key aspects of liberalism, there are features of government policy that would not be regarded as distinctively liberal by some, such as mass mobilisation and participation, and the state's commitment to redistribution of land, wealth and economic participation — large-scale goals based on a strong conception of the good. The Constitution itself builds on the vision of active citizenship developed during the struggles of the 1980s by providing for public participation projects which aim to encourage public access and involvement at the levels of provincial and central government (sections 18, 59, 72). This could be suggested, employing Parekh's distinction, as evidence that the new South Africa is an example of democratic liberalism, rather than liberal democracy. But I would resist such an interpretation, on two grounds. First, that the characteristics attributed to liberal democracy by Parekh

are largely met. Second, with Parekh's characterisation of liberalism cast in doubt in the previous section, it is no longer clear that the distinction can be maintained. The interpretation that I prefer is that liberalism in this context is being developed in a direction that happens to meet Parekh's concern that liberal democracy tends to oppose popular participation and control. Why not interpret this feature of government policy as refining liberal democracy by developing its democratic potential, addressing the limitations of representation as practised in other liberal democracies so far?

What are the implications of the adoption of liberal democracy in South Africa for Parekh's stricture against universalising this western construct? Here we have a case of a society in which the majority, which is overwhelmingly African, has collectively chosen a system of liberal democracy, apparently endorsing its liberal basis in the process. While liberalism is regarded as 'western' in its historical origins and in that most if not all western states are liberal democracies at the moment, the South African example questions both the tendency to continue to mark 'liberal' and 'liberal democracy' as western and the usefulness of this classification.

The political practices of traditional African societies appear to have shared some features in common with contemporary liberal democracies. In his analysis of the problems of post-colonial Africa, George Ayittey (1992) emphasises that pre-colonial African societies enjoyed traditions of free expression, deliberation, opposition, representation and participation, and checks and balances. Arguing the need to reconstruct African political systems by building on the indigenous rather than importing political systems, Ayittey nonetheless proposes a democratic system that includes constitutional checks and balances, separation of the powers of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government, the rule of law, a Bill of Rights, and academic and press freedom as well as freedom of association. This closely resembles liberal democracy, although Ayittey also proposes the incorporation of such tribal institutions as a chief or king, whose selection is subject to popular approval and whose powers are constitutionally defined. His proposals for a 'second liberation of Africa' emerge too from his analysis of the post-colonial period, marked by military dictatorships, civil wars, corruption and economic disintegration. While not explicitly a defence of liberal democracy, his analysis can be read as identifying elements in pre-colonial African politics which have a considerable amount in common with the definitive features of liberal democracy.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, on the other hand, explicitly defends what he calls a radical, modern, cosmopolitan liberalism (1997), while resisting the suggestion that it is 'a creature of Europe'. Appiah attributes the origins of his attachment to liberalism to his father, whose commitment to individual rights was local in its source, rather than borrowed from Europe. 'Two things, in particular', he writes, 'strike me about the local character of the source of my father's increasing

commitment to individual rights: first, that it grew out of experience of illiberal government; second, that it depended on a sense of his own dignity and the dignity of his fellow citizens that was almost entirely the produce of Asante conceptions' (*ibid.*, p. 26).

Appiah's father defended persons whose rights were abused by the post-colonial state in Ghana, and Appiah locates the roots of the political tradition of liberalism in such experiences of illiberal government: 'That liberal restraint on government recommends itself to people rooted in so many different traditions is a reflection of its grasp of a truth about human beings and about modern politics' (*ibid.*). A similar observation can be made about the emergence of liberalism in the post-apartheid polity in South Africa, where the Bill of Rights protects a wide range of rights that were denied and abused by the previous regime. There is also special significance in this context to the new Constitution's emphasis on common citizenship in response to past segregation and on the separation of powers and the rule of law, to replace authoritarian abuse of power and the law. And in the South African context the emphasis on the development of critical thinking and respect for cultural diversity in education is also notable for its origins. The illiberal history of our schooling system reflected neither of them as educational aims, discouraging the questioning of authority and promoting rote learning instead of independent thought. Although it pretended to recognise cultural diversity, schooling in the apartheid era manipulated 'culture' as a strategy of political domination.

What are we to make, then, of the view that liberal democracy should not be universalised beyond western liberal democracies? It seems to me that the South African case as well as other African perspectives demonstrate that a process of universalisation is already under way and indeed that liberalism may be universal in its origins. My reading of these considerations is, *contra* Parekh, that we already live in a cosmopolitan world, where political doctrines cannot be neatly located in those parts of the globe which are their most obvious source. Liberalism already has a more cosmopolitan presence than Parekh acknowledges.

LIBERALISM AND THE CONDITIONS FOR CHOICE

There may be legitimate grounds, contrary to the views of both Parekh and his allies in the liberal fold, for pursuing the spread of liberalism beyond the western liberal democracies, not necessarily by strategies that involve coercion or 'mechanical transplantation', but by what Parekh calls judiciously applied external pressure, including support for a liberal approach to education. One problem with the notion that we should leave societies free to 'choose' tradition against liberal democracy is that their members may not in fact be free to make such a choice. To the extent that such choices are actually made, they are commonly taken by those who exercise both political power and the power to interpret their society's culture and traditions. It is important here not to confuse sovereignty, as exercised by the politically and culturally powerful over

those whose acquiescence is interpreted as choice, with a democratically derived decision.

If we support the principle that societies should be allowed to work out their political destinies, freely to choose a form of government which they regard as appropriate, what does this imply? If choice is indeed freely made, a context of choice is assumed, which requires that two necessary conditions be met. First, a social context is required in which persons are able to exercise choice freely and collectively, evaluating changing circumstances and responding to them. This seems to require at least some of the institutions and rights associated with liberal democracy, such as freedom of association and expression and a free and critical press — if not also multiple political parties and periodic elections. Second and relatedly, members of the society need to have acquired a capacity to exercise choice, to evaluate situations and reach a choice with a degree of autonomy. It would be wrong here to envisage that participation in the choice of a desirable form of government could be a one-off isolated act; for choice of form of government to be possible habits of regularly making choices need to be established. None of this precludes those who choose from electing to retain their traditional way of life and form of government.

In making these observations, I advance a transcendental argument for liberalism, which is that for societies to choose they need the conditions of choice which liberalism seeks to establish. If liberals are seriously committed to respecting the exercise of choice, then they ought to support dissidents in non-liberal societies who campaign for liberal freedoms. Even in the case of non-liberal societies where there appears to be total support for non-liberal traditions, it is possible that the citizens may change their minds and choose a non-traditional form of government. To recognise the possibility that such societies may at a future date choose liberal democracy implies valuing autonomy and the conditions that make its exercise possible.

Promoting liberal democracy and a liberal approach to education in which citizens become familiar with the conditions of choice, especially in societies undergoing rapid change, is not unproblematic. In the South African case there is a tension between pursuing both critical thinking and respect for cultural diversity as liberal aims of education. Emphasising respect for various different cultures is an appropriate response to the racism of the old order, and in a post-colonial and post-apartheid context it seems obviously necessary to promote pride in all cultures as a means to dignity and self-respect. Acquiring knowledge and respect for other traditions, especially on the part of white South Africans, seems to be an aspect of the process of reconciliation which the society needs to undergo. But this diversity of cultures is also vulnerable to the consequences of teaching critical thinking. Will the promotion of critical thinking not make it likely that young citizens will focus their critical thinking skills on their own and other cultural and religious traditions, questioning their credibility and undermining their chances of survival? Indeed, insofar as the traditions of all South African cultures

reflect hierarchical assumptions about authority, particularly gender hierarchies, it can be argued that promoting the capacity for choice requires that aspects of these traditions give way. This is implied in the position of the ANC Women's League, reported above, that customary law and the institution of traditional leaders negate the rights of women, which both do partly by restricting women's opportunities and capacity for choice.

The tension between developing critical thinking and promoting respect for cultural diversity is yet to be taken up and debated in South African education, in contrast to the considerable attention it has received in the United States and the United Kingdom (see for example Strike, 1996; McLaughlin, 1995), prompted partly by Rawls's distinction between political and ethical liberalism. It is a tension that Parekh's critique of liberal democracy exposes. How can respect for diversity, emphasised in both the Constitution and the *White Paper on Education and Training*, be reconciled with their attendant stress on critical and independent thinking? I cannot resolve this tension here, though my sympathies lie with the kind of ethical liberalism expressed by Eamon Callan (1996) in which the social costs of political education based on autonomy are worth incurring if they counter political domination. The point I prefer to make is to draw attention to the need for policy-makers and philosophers of education in South Africa to recognise that aspects of the liberal conception of education in post-apartheid policy require debate.

If a society's political and educational systems are both based on liberal principles it seems like a good idea to recognise this rather than to pretend that it is not the case. Doing so would enable us to follow international debates about liberalism in other liberal democracies, including current debates about civic education. This is especially important because it would prompt informed debate about the pitfalls of liberal democracy, including some of those that concern Parekh. Recognition of the liberal principles underpinning the post-apartheid vision of education would open the way for an urgently needed debate about what is arguably an overemphasis on rights in our education discourse at the expense of duty and responsibility.

Where does this leave liberalism in general, and liberal philosophy of education? One implication of my argument is that liberalism ought no longer to be seen as a doctrine that is put into practice and developed only in western societies. One of the possible implications of the anti-universalisation argument is that liberal ideas can only be developed and refined in such contexts. Recognition of its cosmopolitan presence should open the way for new developments in liberal theory to be made elsewhere. Another implication is that liberal theorists and philosophers of education in the western liberal democracies should rethink their tendency to restrict the applicability of their theories to their own societies. Whether we have in mind liberal democracies elsewhere, or societies promoting democratic liberalism, or traditional societies with dissident majorities or minorities, even a modest commitment to

democracy implies a necessity to foster autonomy, if only to give substance to the claim that their members have chosen their political order.

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